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**Timing is money:
managing the floor in sales interaction at street-market stalls**

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**Timing is money:
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Abstract

This paper considers “pricing”, i.e. offers and requests for the price of sales items, as a communicative practice deployed by vendors and customers during sales interaction on street-markets. It examines the organisation of sales interaction by pursuing the question of how and when market participants, vendors and customers alike, embed offers and requests for price information within their interaction. The analysis suggests that pricing is deployed as a technique to manage the “floor” (Goffman 1981) and the interaction at the stall. For example, offers for items are being tailored to customers’ display of interest and commitment to particular items, and requests for price information are deployed in ways that challenge anticipated offers, i.e. offers that are about to be made by a vendor. The data, field observation and video-recording, have been gathered at market stalls in London and Berlin.

Summary of Contribution

The paper contributes to recent studies concerned with street-markets and market interaction. It explicates the situated and contingent emergence of the communicative practice of pricing in market sales interaction. The paper also makes a methodological contribution by introducing “focused ethnography” as a type of sociological research methods deployed to uncover the organisation of particular activities.

Keywords: street-markets, pricing, timing, sales interaction, communicative practice, focused ethnography, video

Introduction

Despite the long-proclaimed decline of street-markets in Western societies they still are of social and economic importance in most European and US American cities (cf. London Assembly, 2008; Watson & Studdert, 2006). Markets offer a variety of produce and objects ranging from books and CDs to jewellery, art and antiques as well as fruit and vegetables that attract local people and tourists alike. Their popularity and appeal originates from a particular retail experience that is fostered by the diversity of objects available for purchase, the variability of the price charged for items, and the social organisation of sales encounters that sometimes are described as “informal” (Cook, 2008; Sherry, 2008).

Relatively few studies explore in detail talk and interaction on street-markets. Those studies with an interest in interaction on markets largely rely on ethnography and are primarily concerned with “substantivist” (Polanyi, 1944) questions, such as the embeddedness of markets in wider societal structures and therefore interested in the impact of society on market interaction (Caliskan, 2007, 2010; Granovetter & Swedberg, 2001; Swedberg, 2007; Varman & Costa, 2008, 2009). This paper shifts the focus away from external variables that may influence sales interaction to the organisation of the interaction itself and to the communicative practice of pricing in particular.

The paper draws on ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, 2002) that provides an analytic orientation for the investigation of social practice as an ongoingly produced and “indexical” (Garfinkel, 1967) social phenomenon. Theoretically, therefore, the paper relates to current debates about the embodied production of “social facts” (Garfinkel, 2002), “praxis theory” (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & Savigny, 2000) and debates about “marketing-as-practice” (Brownlie, Hower & Ferguson, 2007; Brownlie & Hower, 2011; Skålén & Hackley, 2011)

Due to its concern with particular social phenomena the analysis uses “focused ethnography” (Knoblauch, 2005) as method to gather and examine data. Focused ethnography or “short-term ethnography” as Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan (2013) have recently called it, involves relatively short periods of data collection combined with the gathering of a variety of data, including photographs, written documents and audio-/video-recording that allow for the intensive study of particular aspects of situations of interest to the researchers.

The social phenomenon under scrutiny in this paper is the emergence of “pricing” as a “communicative practice” (Knoblauch, 2012) deployed in sales interaction on street markets. By examining field observation and audio-video-recording of 60 sales encounters on markets in London and Berlin the analysis explicates how and in particular when pricing is deployed by market participants and what implications pricing has for the interaction between vendor and customer.

Pricing on Informal Markets

Over the past couple of decades, marketing and consumer research has often been (pre-)occupied with exploring and supporting the development of long-term relationships with customers who co-create products and services (Grönroos, 2007). In recent years, however, marketing and sociological research also has begun to become concerned with informal markets where sales encounters are subject to and influenced by contingent circumstances and events. These studies include sales on sidewalks (Duneier, 1999), city streets (Llewellyn & Burrow, 2008), farmers markets (Pradelle, 2006), and auctions (Heath, 2012; Smith, 1989). The markets under scrutiny in that research, have in common that the price of goods for sale are not subject to the same standards as in conventional retail settings as it is marked as flexible and negotiable. Moreover, on informal markets people engage in relatively short and fleeting interaction that sometimes leads to the sale and purchase of items without vendors and customers planning to meet ever again.

Ethnographic studies on street- and flea-markets and at garage sales explore consumer and economic behaviour in these informal retail environments (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988; Herrmann, 1997; McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley, 1993). They describe informal markets as dynamic “action scene” (Maisel, 1974) where both vendors and customers put on performances. Consumer research on flea-markets considers the impact of situational variables like the ambience of a market and the relationship between vendors and customers on people’s market experience. They point to the importance of opportunities for bargaining and haggling to people’s market experience and highlight that vendors’ pricing strategies are embedded within the temporal, spatial and social organisation of the market (Pradelle, 2006; Pinch & Clark, 1995; Sherry, 1990). Yet, they provide little insight into the practices through which price information for items emerges and is brought to bear in sales interaction.

This lack of research on pricing as communicative practice reflects the view in large parts of sociology and marketing that products and services are priced before they arrive on the market and that pricing is based on “careful reasoning” and an assessment of how customers might respond to a particular price (Kotler, Armstrong, Wong, & Saunders, 2004). Investigations that explore the reasoning of retailers in setting price levels address this gap in the literature (Prus, 1989ab). They consider “the rich world of prices” (Caliskan, 2007) and “the material processes” through which prices are socially constructed in social interaction (Caliskan, 2010).

Studies of market pitchers and auctioneers have begun to elaborate on the social organisation of market interaction and particularly examine the social and sequential organisation of pricing levels. Clark and colleagues investigate the work of market pitchers and sales interaction in formal retail settings and on markets (Clark, Drew, & Pinch, 1994; Clark & Pinch, 2001, 2009; Pinch & Clark, 1995). They argue that market pitchers treat price levels as variable. They adjust price levels according to the business on a particular

day, for example when they are keen to sell perishable good before the day ends. These studies of sales interaction reveal that detailed ethnographic and video-based research can help explicate the social organisation of sales encounters on informal markets. This paper takes up this argument by examining how participants deploy pricing, i.e. the communicative practice of putting prices to sales items through offers and requests for price information in sales interaction on street markets.

Focused Ethnography of Street-Market Interaction

This study uses sociological ethnography and in particular “focused ethnography” (Knoblauch, 2005) as its principal research method. This type of sociological ethnography has been developed in light of Alfred Schutz’s (1967) social phenomenology of the everyday. Rather than exploring strange cultures sociological ethnographers study how people in the same society who largely use a “common stock of knowledge” organise social situations. So, rather than exploring “strangeness” of a different culture, sociological ethnographers investigate “alterity” of people, situations and organisations in their own society (Knoblauch, 2005).

Unlike other developments in sociological ethnography (cf. Eberle & Maeder, 2005; Kusenbach, 2005), focused ethnography is often concerned with studies of interaction at workplaces but recently also has turned to studies of social situations in the home, in museums, in cars, in cafes and elsewhere (Brown, 2004; Brown & Laurier, 2012; Laurier & Philo, 2007; Pink, 2004; vom Lehn, 2010). In comparison to anthropological ethnography for the purpose of conducting focused ethnography the researcher does not spend a lengthy and continuous period of time in the field but visits the field for short periods at various intervals. During those short periods of data collection the researcher gathers a large amount of diverse data, including field observations, audio-/video-recording, photographs, written documents and other material. S/he is not primarily concerned with understanding how actions are embedded in a wider social and cultural

context but with explicating the organisation of practice.

My study of street-markets emerged in the context of the EPSRC-funded project UTIFORO concerned with informal markets. As part of the project I made field observations on street-markets in London, including Portobello Market, Borough Market, Columbia Flower Market, Lewisham Market, Greenwich Market and Spitalfields Market. I then also gathered a small amount of observational data augmented by informal interviews with vendors and customers on markets in Germany, in particular on a street-market in Berlin but also conducted field observations on weekly markets in Freiburg and Hamm Westfalen. By virtue of the selection of markets for more detailed study, I aimed to make sure that over all I gather data on a variety of markets attended by different kinds of people, including for example locals and tourists, individuals, pairs and groups, and where a wide variety of items are on sale. Overall, I observed interaction on markets in the UK and Germany for about eight weeks. I am aware that by limiting my research to a relatively small number of markets and a large proportion of markets being based in London I will not be able to make generic claims about market trading in general; but that is, as I will explain below, not the purpose of the analysis.

The purpose of this study was to explore the social organisation of market interactions that some economic sociologists (cf. Caliskan, 2010) consider to be the locales where the business of the market happens. In the first phase of the research I was primarily interested in investigating the differences between different markets, for example with regard to their management but also with regards to the products and produce on sale, the customers they attract and the vendors that do their business there. Based on this first phase of the research I first explored people's navigation of markets and their selection of stalls. I then spent considerable time observing and making field notes of customers' interaction with vendors and became increasingly interested in the organisation of sales interaction at stalls and developed more focused research questions directed at the vendor-customer interaction.

One of these questions was to explore how information about the price of items features in sales interaction. It transpired that rather than being a marketing tool and part of the marketing mix pricing is a communicative practice that market participants use in their interaction at market stalls.

“Communicative practice” is a strand of research initiated by Knoblauch since the mid-1990s. With this concept of communicative practice Knoblauch markedly diverts from earlier theories of communicative action by Habermas (1987) in that he does not focus on language and signs but includes performative aspects of communication in the analysis of social situations. In his view, communication involves “work”, i.e. bodily and material action through which meaning is made observable. The observability of action allows people to align each other’s action and generate a sense of a shared social world or intersubjectivity (Garfinkel, 2002; Knoblauch, 2012).

Whilst field observation provides me with access to the organisation of communicative practice on street-markets video-recordings allow me to repeatedly examine fragments of interaction and thus to progressively reveal the organisation of otherwise fleeting events. Video-recording of people in public and semi-public settings requires permission from participants as well as sometimes from the management of the market. Many vendors have reservations to being filmed at work. Some argue they feel the camera might drive away custom, whilst others say that they “do not want trouble with the taxman”. Because of the difficulty to obtain permission from vendors I went to markets and asked individual vendors whether they would allow me to video-record them. In one case where the market was organised by a management company they referred me to the company’s chair who allowed me to film vendors he selected after having discussed the project with them. I then approached the vendor and discussed with them the terms of the study and setup the camera.

At other markets, I directly approached vendors and asked them for permission to film

them during their work; I thereby selected vendors based on my prior observations and focused on stalls that seemed to receive a reasonable interest from customers. On receiving the vendor's agreement I set up a stationary camcorder on a tripod where I recorded the events at the selected stall. Signature in the vicinity of the stalls under scrutiny informed passers-by and customers about the research. Overall, I video-recorded 60 hours of sales interaction on four markets, three in London and one in Berlin. I observed market behaviour on these four markets as well as field observations on markets elsewhere in Germany, including Hamm and Freiburg.

To avoid participants responding to the camera I did not stand behind the camera but only returned to it to change tapes. Also, the red recording light at the front of the camera was switched off to not draw undue attention to the device. Thus, reactivity to the data gathering could be reduced. Although the vendors were equipped with wireless microphones to facilitate audio-recording alongside the video-recording their awareness of the device and the recording progressively faded. Only a few passers-by attended to the camera and approached me, asking about the project out of curiosity and because they were working in a marketing capacity; no participant asked for the recordings to be stopped or wiped after the event. Overall, I can confidently argue that the recordings of sales interaction do not show evidence of the participants orienting to the microphone or the camera and that the quality of the data is not affected by participants responding to the recording. This observation is corroborated by Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff (2010) as well as by Laurier and Philo (2006) who argue that "while the camera is omni-present in the setting, it is by no means omni-relevant".

The video-recordings allow me access to the details of participants' interaction as they can be repeatedly reviewed and scrutinised. Their analysis requires a particular analytic and methodological framework for the analysis. For this study I have used a type of video-analysis that is related to recent developments in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and

Timing is money conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), namely video-based studies of interaction (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010) and videography (Tuma, Schnettler & Knoblauch, 2013). Versions of this method have been deployed previously for studies of market pitchers (Clark & Pinch, 2009; Pinch & Clark, 1995) and fine art and antiques auctions (Heath, 2012). These studies, like mine here, are interested not in entire fields and their embeddedness in social structures but in particular aspects of fields, i.e. in the organization of particular activities, such as the activity of selling of newspapers on city streets (Llewellyn & Burrows, 2008) and the management and organisation of service queues (Brown, 2004). Hence, this paper investigates the “seen but unnoticed” (Garfinkel, 1967) practices that contribute to the business at market stalls.

Rather than presupposing that the participants’ practices are influenced or even determined by a context of social norms, cultural conventions or personal relationships the analysis considers the practices as contributing to and reshaping the context in which they arise. The context for action therefore is seen as ongoingly arising in, and through, the situated production of action (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). Video-recordings of specific instances of sales interaction are examined to reveal how market participants deploy the communicative practice of pricing, *in situ*.

This is not to say, of course, that the vendors and customers all conduct their actions in exactly the same way, or that their actions might not be motivated by personal relationships, liking and dis-liking people, gender and power relationships etc. Yet, the analysis can only make reference to such structural features of sales interaction when the participants themselves refer to and draw upon it when conducting their actions. Hence, rather than presupposing that an organisation of action on street-markets is generated in response to “social norms” (Varman & Costa, 2008) and the cultural context (Geertz, 1963; Varman & Costa, 2009) this paper investigates the orderly aspects within the highly complex and variable production of street-market interaction. Hence, I do not look for

Timing is money reasons for the production and design of participants' actions in the wider social circumstances but my analysis is concerned with the examination of the orderly production of the practices through which participants interact with each other.

The analysis of the field observation and video-recording begins with the identification of patterns and reoccurring events, one of which was the deployment of price statements and price requests by the participants as part of the sales interaction. I then create collections of events and issues allowing me to compare and contrast cases and develop my analysis. I have transcribed participants' talk and compared cases across my collection of data. "Members checks" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were conducted by discussing observations from the data analysis with vendors to ensure their accuracy; I also have shown selected fragments of video to vendors to elicit comments on the events. As is common practice in ethnography, in the paper I discuss cases from my collection that particularly clearly show the phenomena the analysis focuses on.

Timing Offers

The markets discussed by Geertz (1963) and more recently by Varman and Costa (2008, 2009) as well as by the contributors to Cook's (2008) volume noticeably differ from the street-markets subject to my research. In particular the markets in London are characterised by a large number of tourist consumers and by consumers who may have grown up elsewhere but now have made Britain's capital their home. They often visit the markets during lunch-breaks or as part of their leisurely exploration of the city. As they stroll down the street they intermittently stop at stalls and examine the items on display. Their hesitation in touching the items and their shy approach of the vendor suggests that they have little experience with the informal organisation of street-market trading; it also reflects that sometimes English is their second language.

Because these people are not regular participants in the street-market business but explore them only on leisurely strolls, they often do not know what objects are on sale and have not come to make a particular purchase but encounter stalls more or less by chance. To increase the likelihood for people to stop at their stall vendors design and setup their stalls in certain ways that – hopefully – encourage people to approach them. The vendors themselves who sell items, such as jewellery, porcelain dishes, books, garments and second-hand clothes as well as jumble stand or sit quietly at or near their stall, or sometimes linger a little remote from but in viewing distance from the stall.

When customers arrive they often slow down and glance at the offerings before coming to stand and look at items of interest to them. On their approach of a stall they are often greeted by the vendor, either with a polite “hello” or tip to the hat or with some information about what is on offer at the stall. Price information frequently features in the opening of the interaction at market stalls.

For example,

at a stall where a wide variety of objects are on sale the vendor approaches a customer who has just settled at the stall and holds a paperback book in her hand. After a brief opening sequence involving the exchange of colloquial greetings accompanied by a fleeting eye contact the vendor voices a pitch involving two price statements, “just three Pounds, each or two for a fiver”.

It is noteworthy that the vendor produces approaches the customer and the offer for a discount just when she displays interest in one of the paperbacks by picking it up and holding it in her hand. The timing of the price statement and the subsequent offer for a multi-buy suggest that the vendor has noticed the woman’s interest in the item and aims to encourage her to stay for longer at the stall and maybe find further books she might like. His price statement and subsequent offer for a multi-buy encourage her to consider the

purchase of the book she has already picked up and to look for other items of the same kind to obtain a lower price when bought in conjunct with at least two more books.

Price statements not simply inform customers about the price of items but also encourage customers to see the item in their hand as a *purchase-able*, i.e. an item they might want to buy. They can be printed or written on items or, as in the case in hand written on the item and vocalised. The way in which items are tagged can already display the status of the price. For example, second-hand books, like those on sale here, often have the price written inside the cover of the book with a pencil. Other books on the stall, in particular the hardbacks have tags stuck on the cover that often have begun to peel off. Both forms of tagging embody a kind of potential variability of price, a price that can be struck out, erased or peeled off. The price reduction for a multi-buy that follows the initial offer for the book the customer has picked up from the table adds to the impression that prices at this stall are variable and therefore negotiable.

Providing customers with price information and then augment it by an offer for multi-buys is a technique regularly deployed by vendors when customers come to stop at their stall. Such communicative practices encourage customers to acknowledge the vendor by responding to him either with an utterance or with a brief glance. The provision of price information, therefore, at the same time is used as a conversational opening and as a method to encourage the customer to keep interested in the stall and continue their browsing through the stock. It is used so widely because, as Geertz (1963: 35) writes with regard to “pasars”, vendors are “perpetually looking for a chance to make a smaller or larger killing, not attempting to build up a stable clientele or a steadily growing business”. Their interest is in the here and now as they do not aim to develop a long-term relationship with customers but to make as much profit from each current interaction. Hence, it is critical to encourage customers who have stopped at the stall to stay that they can turn them into buyers.

On a market located in Berlin where vendors sell clothes such as t-shirts and jeans spread out across large tables customers often approach the stall and browse through the goods. When they ask the vendor for a price, “Was kosten denn eure T-shirts?” (“How much are your T-shirts?”) they are told that there are differences between items spread out on the table and items piled up in boxes, “die in Boxen kosten fünfzehn und auf dem Tisch hier zwanzig” (“those in boxes are fifteen and those on the table here twenty”).

Whilst by-and-large the prices for shirts at this stall appear to be fixed we still observe ambiguity about the price. For example, the vendor explains that there are differences between t-shirts on the table and in the boxes. But what about the shirts that previous customers have looked at and not properly returned to the boxes, etc., and what about shirts that have fallen on the floor? The lack or incompleteness of information about the products occasion requests for more specific price information. These requests again are produced as customers arrive at the stall and meet the vendor. They at the same time query the price of the sales items and open the conversation with the vendor.

The opening of interaction on markets where fruit and vegetables, garden plants and flowers are being sold, including the production of offers, works a little differently. The market arrangement and organisation differs from above flea-markets in that there are a number of stalls that offer the same kind of items and large information boards and signs at the stall display the price for items. Vendors stand at their stalls looking outwards to the street where potential customers walk and loudly make offers through melodious announcements that can be heard across the entire street. The offers include information about what items are on sale at this stall as well as their price. For example,

two women walk along a row of stalls on a street-market where garden-plants are on sale. As a vendor sees them passing-by the neighbouring stall on the right moving closer towards his stall he briefly looks to them and then shouts out, “Eight lovely

heathers in a tray dozen quid twelve Pounds”. As the vendor produces the announcement he looks away from the two woman and glances across the items on sale at his stall.

On a fruit and vegetable market where on this day there has been relatively little business a vendor talks to a colleague when a group of passers-by arrive nearby. As he notices these people in the vicinity of the stall he calls out, “Two Pounds bananas for a fiver”, and looks at them.

Whilst standing at their stall vendors monitor events in the locale and are sensitive to the arrival of potentially interested customers. They differentiate between uninterested passers-by and potential buyers by virtue of the ways in which these people walk across the market, where they look while walking etc. On noticing people they think they might be able to turn them into buyers they vocalise or announce an offer that draws attention to the stall and sometimes encourages passers-by to approach and inspect the sales items.

Loudly announced offers coupled with looks that may facilitate an exchange of glances are a technique vendors in my data often use to attract custom. They are common on markets where items such as plants, food or fruit and vegetables are being sold. They include a description of the items displayed at the stall but that may be difficult to make out from a distance, followed by the offer. The offers on these kinds of markets rarely invite negotiation but instead use price information written on boards displayed at the stall coupled with the repeated announcements, to reaffirm the price and make “haggling” difficult.

As Geertz (1963) implied in his studies of “pasars”, vendors try to attract and involve people in interaction in order to create opportunities to turn them into buyers. Hence, it is critical for vendors to develop effective techniques that will attract customers to a stall and keep them interested in the offering. When on markets we often notice the repetitive

vocalisation of announcements and offers that vendors use to increase interest in their stall. The analysis suggests that although on the surface vendors generate recurring vocalisations independent from the going-ons announcements and offers are often timed with the arrival of potential customers in the vicinity of the stall. Furthermore, we have seen from the first few cases that announcements and offers include price information that is communicated not only to inform customers about the exchange value of an item but also and in particular to engender and maintain their interest in the stall, to open conversation with them and to test the possibility of turning them into buyers.

Offers and Counter Offers

The opening of the sales interaction at a market stall is often followed by a period when the vendor leaves the customer to explore the stall independently. By virtue of the opening of the sales interaction and the activity the customer engages in subsequently the vendor can make a judgement about the possibility to turn her/him into a buyer. For example,

a vendor approaches and greets a customer who has arrived at his stall and browses through paperback books laid out on a table. He then leaves the customer and interacts with another customer at the other end of the stall. After about half a minute the customer holds a book in his hand while browsing a stack of LPs. As he glances at the records he occasionally looks up to the vendor who talks to the other customer. As soon as the vendor notices that the customer looks at him he brings the interaction with the other customer to a close and approaches the customer.

When after the opening of sales interaction the customer turns to particular items and examines them the vendor's shift in orientation suggests that he may assume that the customer has an interest in the offerings and might make a purchase. From here on, the vendor considers her/him as a potential buyer and her/his principal attention is on the interaction with this customer, even when other customers arrive at the stall. All activities

he now engages in can be seen as “side involvements” (Goffman 1963) as the vendor’s prime interest is with the customer he has previously opened interaction with. While standing at the stall the vendor tidies the stall or attends to other customers. He however recurrently looks over to the potential buyer and monitors his state of involvement, noticing changes in orientation, such as shifts from books to LPs, and changes in the state of involvement by differentiating the customer’s level of interest based on the way in which he browses the items (cf. Clark & Pinch, 2009). In the case in hand, for instance, the customer first inspects one or two of the paperbacks by opening them up and reading a few lines, whilst when moving to the stack of LPs he flips through two or three of them without taking them out to look at their covers. He also looks up and glances to the vendor who at the time talks to another customer. Yet, when he catches the potential buyer’s eyes he brings that interaction to a close and joins the potential buyer who then begins to negotiate the price of the book he holds in his hand.

When the vendor arrives next to the customer the young man asks “can you bring the price down to twofifty?”. The customer voices the request quietly and in a subdued fashion while looking and reticently smiling at the vendor. When the customer brings the request for a price reduction to a close he looks at the vendor and places the book on the stack of vinyls between the participants while keeping his left hand on its cover.

I often observed customers and vendors placing sales items on the table after an offer has been made. The action puts emphasis on the offer made and changes the status of the item. By holding an item in the hands a customer displays that s/he has an interest in buying it; the item is a potential purchase. In the case here, the customer returns the item to the table while still touching it; he thus displays a change in the status of the item from a potential purchase to an item that he is interested in but might not buy depending on the vendor’s response to his offer.

The vendor turns the request into a joke, already before the customer has brought the request to a close and says, “is that all you got, right?” occasioning the customer to turn his reticent smile into a shy, almost embarrassed withdrawal from his position. In recognising that his offer has become untenable the customer turns to his bag and prepares to bring the sale to a close. A moment later, he fumbles for his wallet and hands the correct change to the vendor. He then takes the book from the stack of vinyls and leaves the stall while both participants voice friendly goodbyes.

The customer’s prior examination of the book provides the vendor with a reason to assume that he might be able to make a sale. He sees the customer holding a book and showing little commitment to the stack of records as he superficially flips through them. He therefore is prepared to bring his interaction with the other customer to a close, even lets him leave the stall, to be able to approach the customer and engage with him in sales interaction. The interaction that had lapsed for a few minutes is taken up again by a reference to the price of sales items. This time, however the conversation is not generally about the price of paperbacks at the stall but it enquires about the possibility to decrease the price of a specific book that the customer is interested in. As Geertz (1978: 32) has noted with regard to the “bazaar economy”, price negotiation on street-markets “takes place to the right of the decimal point. But it is no less keen for that”. In the case in hand the vendor is not prepared to let the price of the book slide, not even by fifty pence. Instead, he displays certainty that he can yield the full price on this sale and thus maximise the outcome in the sales interaction. The design and timing of his response undermine the customer’s attempt to obtain a better deal on the book. This undermining of the request for a lower price is achieved by producing the response in overlap with the customer’s request, thereby challenging its importance and relevance, and reclaiming the “floor” (Goffman, 1981) in the interaction. The production of the request is interrupted and a situation is created in which the sales interaction is conducted on the vendor’s terms.

In other cases, customers are successful in achieving a price reduction. For example,

a customer has been at a stall for about nine minutes. During this time he explores a stack of singles on the right side of the table and then turns to the assortment of LPs. He browses the LPs one by one and takes some from the two stacks and piles them up on the table to his right. The vendor monitors the customer's actions while noticing another customer on the other side of the stall. He greets and interacts with him until becoming aware that the customer who has been browsing the LPs is about to bring his examination of the LPs to a close and is ready to pay. He walks to the young man, stands next to him and then picks up the LPs and singles the man has selected and begins to make the sums, "six, twelve, eighteen yah thirty". As he has inspected all the LPs and singles he looks up when the customer turns to him and says, "twenty five", pre-empting the vendor in making an offer and encouraging him to produce a counter-offer, "I do it for twenty seven for you mate".

Initial offers made by vendors or customers set the level at which a possible negotiation about price begins. The participant who produces the offer for which he is willing to sell or buy the item takes the floor and sets the level where the negotiation begins. Yet, because the vendor is the owner of the items s/he has the last word on whether he will hand it over for a certain amount. Therefore, the price tags, although they might be hand-written and peeling of the cover of a book or LP, are the first, if unspoken, move in the negotiation about the sales price. To produce a credible offer customers base it on the information given in the price tag. And they design the counter offer in a way that occasions the vendor to treat it as starting-point for a negotiation about the price.

The young customer at the LPs makes an offer that the vendor treats as being lower than the price he had in mind but high enough to be taken seriously. By making the offer immediately following the vendors' calculation of the sum the customer takes the floor and seemingly defines the starting-point for the price negotiation. He does

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not give the vendor an opportunity to be the one who makes that verbal offer and, at least for a moment, is in charge of the business at hand. His ability to make the initial offer is based on him making the sums prior to the vendor and therefore being able to offer “twenty five” Pounds for the selection of records on the table encouraging the vendor to make a counter-offer.

As in the case discussed above the timing of the customer’s offer is critical to the possibility to “get a good deal”. Whilst in the case of the book sale the vendor’s price statement overlapped with the customer’s request for a price reduction, in this case the customer’s production of the offer overlaps with the vendor’s calculation of a price reduction and prefigures its oral production. The customer voices the offer just when the vendor places the last single on the table and voices the sum of the collection of items. On completion of his offer the customer looks at the vendor who with his head tilted forward looks into the middle distance displaying that he considers the customer’s offer and thinks about an appropriate price for the goods. The vendor does not reject the offer outright but his hesitation suggests that he is resistant to accept it (cf. Clark, Drew, & Pinch, 1994). He tries to make a sale and does not want to alienate the customer. At the same time, by extending the pause after he has made the sums for the selection the vendor displays resistance to the customer’s offer and allows him to come up with an alternative, “I do it for twenty seven for you mate”.

On producing the counter-offer the vendor nods twice and physically removes himself from the customer, thus literally providing him with space to think about the (counter-)offer. He now stands two steps away from and looks at the customer who on completion of the price statement visually returns to the stack of LPs and begins to again browse the goods, this time however without showing a particular interest in them. The customer’s withdrawal and silence, in contrast to a pause, in response to

the vendor's (counter-)offer indicates not only his resistance but his rejection of it, occasioning the vendor to account for the quality of the offer, "Ten percent".

The vendor is faced with a dilemma: he wants to secure the customer's commitment to buy the LPs he has selected but the customer has made an offer that he cannot accept. He therefore makes a counter-offer and then takes a few steps distance from the customer, a physical distance that vendors in my data seem to keep when allowing customers space for thinking about an offer. In many cases, participants then propose an offer that lies in between the two proposals to close the sale; here for example, a next possible turn could have been an offer of twenty-six Pounds by the customer. The young man however remains silent and does not attend to the vendor's offer suggesting that he rejects the vendor's offer occasioning, if not demanding from, the vendor to make the next move. Although the customer does not say anything he keeps the floor as he has surprised the vendor by making an offer before him.

A moment later, the vendor takes an album from the stack that the customer had examined and shown an interest in earlier but returned to the stack because at "thirty five Pounds" he saw it as too expensive. The vendor pulls the album up and says, "with this I tell you what for fifty I do the lot". He then again steps back giving the customer space to think about the offer. The customer again looks at the jazz album but eventually declines the offer. He then turns to his original selection of LPs and singles and the two participants close the sale at twenty-seven Pounds.

By drawing the customer's attention to an album he has shown an interest in earlier and by making him an offer for it the vendor tries to regain the floor. He thereby attempts to use the flexibility of price to his advantage. Having been unsuccessful to sell the stack of records to the customer on his terms he decreases the relatively high price of this particular record when it is bought together with the others. This technique at the same time obfuscates the price of each individual record as it presents the multi-buy as a good deal.

The margins of street-market vendors are fairly low and in general, they told me, they are prepared to reduce the price by up-to ten percent. In the case in hand when the vendor offers a ten percent reduction for the stack of records he already has reached the limit of the reduction in price that would still give him a profit on the records. Because of the tight margins on the sales items it is important for vendors to remain in charge of the pricing of their stock, or when having lost the floor to a customer, as in the case here, it is critical to regain it in order to determine the price of a customer's selection and not lose the customer altogether.

Again, we see how important it is for vendors to perpetually monitor customers' action at the stall and what items they show an interest in. In this case, the vendor is able to at least challenge the customer's offer because he had seen him inspecting a particular record a few minutes earlier. He then brings to bear his knowledge about the item, in particular the original purchase price, to lead the sales price for the collection slide considerably in an attempt to regain the floor and determine the terms of the sale, allowing him to make a profit whilst appearing to have dropped the price considerably.

Inviting Offers

Not all people who stop at a stall are easily turned into potential buyers. Some customers stop and glance at items but immediately turn away when the vendor approaches them. They often place their bodies sideways at the stall with one foot pointing outward to allow them a 'quick escape'. Their bodily position and posture display a hesitant involvement with the stall. When asked by the vendor they might say what item they are interested in but then decline to even discuss an offer. Some vendors therefore deploy a technique that when successful in receiving a response often turns customers into potential buyers.

A vendor describes a book's qualities by hinting at its quality before suggesting that it would cost "one hundred Pounds" "if it wasn't damaged". By mentioning that the

book is damaged the vendor opens up the possibility that its price may be negotiable. The customer in turn looks up from the book and asks, “negotiable?”, occasioning the vendor to encourage the customer to set his own price, “go on tell me how much”. After a short pause the customer offers forty Pounds for the book. As he voices his offer the customer moves away from the table to face the vendor; the book has remained on the table and is out of immediate reach for both participants. The vendor replies in saying “fifty” occasioning the customer to briefly pause and then decline the offer before turning to leave the stall.

The book the customer shows an interest in, is damaged and therefore one of the items that this particular vendor has found difficult to sell. When a customer displays an interest in the object by opening it up and browsing through a few of its pages the vendor takes the opportunity and invites the customer to make an offer for the item, “go and tell me how much”. By responding to this invitation and voicing an offer, “forty”, the customer turns himself into a potential buyer. He not only displays an interest in the item but also has suggested that he will buy it when the vendor accepts his offer.

Offers produced in sales interaction can be accepted or rejected (Davidson, 1984) or, as in the case here, can be subjected to negotiation and attended to by counter-offers. In the case in hand, the vendor encourages an offer from the customer. This invitation secures the customer’s interest in the book, at least for a few more moments, whilst at the same time allowing the vendor to remain in charge of the pricing of the item. When the customer makes his offer of forty Pounds for the book the vendor pauses and then produces the counter-offer, “fifty”, with a determined voice while looking into the customer’s eyes. The pause prior to the counter-offer displays at the same time thinking about the offer and resistance to it (cf. Clark, Drew & Pinch, 1994). When he then voices the counter offer he looks at the customer and nods at him. His oral and bodily actions request, if not demand, a

response from the customer. In this case, the customer resists the offer and withdraws from the stall reassuring the vendor that he will think about it and return later.

Inviting customers to make an offer for items is a quite unusual technique that was rarely deployed on the markets I studied. It is a technique that can encourage customers to stay at the stall and thus increase the likelihood to make a sale happen. It enhances the display of negotiability of price and suggests that, at least for a moment, the customer is in charge of the pricing of an item. However, as the invitation is setup it is the vendor who by virtue of a counter-offer can accept or reject the customer's proposal. In the following case a vendor who sells bags of beads and other kinds of jewellery interacts with a customer who has examined various of these bags for a while.

The customer decides to buy two bags of beads whilst rejecting a third bag that contains a number of quite expensive Pikake beads because they are too pricey for him, "no no I leave those. I just take these". The vendor attends to the customer's resistance to buy those more expensive beads in light of his earlier displayed interest in them not only by inviting an offer, "make me a reasonable offer", but also by providing an account for why a price much lower than the originally stated one, is possible, "to be honest I had them for a while".

The invitation for a "reasonable offer" suggests that making a sale is the vendor's principal objective, even when he would make a (small) loss on the item. He prefers to sell the beads on a loss, rather than hanging on to the beads any longer. The conditions for a sale that the vendor may have set in the beginning of the day or when he acquired the products to sell at his stall become vulnerable when these products turn out to be "stickers", goods that are difficult to sell on, or as in the previous case when business in general has been slow on the day due to bad weather or other circumstances. The "set-your-own-price" technique seemingly empowers the customer as it allows her/him to set a price and thus to define the

Timing is money terms of the sale. S/he can choose a price that in her/his view is acceptable. The offer encourages the vendor to either accept it or by virtue of a counter offer resist it.

The analysis suggests that vendors sometimes are in a position where they are particularly keen to make a sale. Such circumstances arise when business is slow or when vendors have acquired stock that has turned out to be difficult to sell. In these situations, techniques that invite customers to make an offer can help business, sometimes at the cost of the profit margin. These techniques create the appearance that the customer now is in charge of terms of the sale although the base price has been prearranged by the vendor; and a range for the price has been indicated by price tags and prices, however sloppily, written on the items. By making an offer the customer indicates, or even enhances her/his interest in an item, and encourages a response from the vendor who in turn accepts or resists but rarely, if ever, rejects it. Her/his response is designed to drive up the possible margin and close the sale. Whilst some cases, the customer's interest in an item can not be maintained, the technique almost always works to at least keep a customer at a stall and explore the offerings and thus to increase the likelihood for a sale.

Discussion and Implications

The popular appeal of street-markets and similarly retail settings originates in the informal character of the sales encounters between vendors and customers. The variability and flexibility in price, the possibility to make a surprising find and the uncertain quality of products adds an exciting aspect to the shopping experience lacking from more formal retail environments (Cook, 2008; McGrath, Sherry, Belk, 1993; Sherry, 1990). These characteristics of markets require vendors to bring specific skills and abilities to sales encounters, in particular with regard to the pricing of products. A number of studies in anthropology, sociology and economics describe vendors' activities as "streetwise marketing" (Pinch & Clark, 1995) and explore bargaining and haggling on street- and flea-

Timing is money markets and at garage sales (Alexander & Alexander, 1987; Herrmann, 1997, 2003; Marchi, 1994). Related research in marketing investigates how participants' behaviour is influenced and shaped by social norms and the cultural environment it is embedded within (Varman & Costa, 2008, 2009).

This paper contributes to this growing body of research by adding a perspective that highlights situated aspects of sales interaction at market stalls. It uses a novel method, "focused ethnography", to study the communicative practice of "pricing" and the timing of that practice in sales interaction at market stalls. Pricing is a communicative practice that vendors and customers deploy to manage the floor and organise sales interaction (cf. Goffman, 1981). It comprises the performance of offers and requests for price information that are deployed at critical junctures in the interaction, such as when a customer displays interest in a particular item or when a customer displays s/he is ready to pay. In these moments, vendors use pricing to keep customers interested in a stall, guide them to look at related items or provide them with information they can use to complete the purchase. Pricing also is used by customers when they have made their selection and in some cases to undercut an anticipated offer for an item or in response to a vendor who encourages them to make an offer for an item.

In these cases, the negotiation of the price begins at a base line that generally is set by the vendor who has tagged or verbally given the price for sales items. Similar to the auctioneers in Heath's (2012) study who begin an auction by reading out prices from a book the participants on markets begin their negotiation from the price written or tagged on the items. The negotiation then decreases the price whereby the vendor is concerned with keeping it above a certain level ("Ten percent") whilst the customer tries to reduce it further.

The analysis suggests that the interests of the market participants converge when agreement is achieved on the exchange of items. For this to happen the timing of the

pricing and the design of the communicative practice is critical. The analysis in this paper shifts the focus to the situated deployment of pricing in sales interaction. Offers are made for a range of reasons, including to deliver price information, to encourage a sale, to generate and maintain customers' interest in the stall, to elicit counter offers, to initiate price negotiation and to bring sales interaction to a close. Whilst social norms and cultural conventions might play a role in this process, an analysis that begins with the presupposition of such external influences on the interaction neglects the uncovering of the situated and contingent practices through which each sales interaction is accomplished.

From the analysis we see how the creation of the possibility for price negotiation, for example, by virtue of deliberately sloppy tagging or by opening offers that render the price of items negotiable, seemingly empowers customers. In the final fragment we indeed find that a customer who knows the quality and can assess the worth of an item and who also seems versatile in street-market interaction is able to obtain a good deal that is finalised more on his terms than on the terms of the vendor. Yet, in most cases that I have observed and filmed on these markets vendors keep in charge of the terms of the sale, even when momentarily they give the floor to customer for example by giving them the opportunity to make an offer for an item.

With this paper therefore I have begun to explore some of the practices through which street-wise marketers such as participants in street-markets, engage in and organise sales interaction. In further studies of street-market interaction I plan to examine phenomena related to the making of offers for sales items, such as the practical organisation of price negotiation or the display of changing ownership at different moments in the interaction. Thereby, I also plan to re-embed specific activities, such as the deployment of price negotiation techniques in the social context of the market. Here, I only have made a small beginning in the study of street-market interaction.

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